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ABSTRACT

In the 1950's, Charles S. Johnson, the first black president of Fisk University (Tennessee), greatly expanded the institution's international program, attracting many foreign students to the school and creating a milieu that gave American blacks the benefits of integration. This paper examines how the presence of outsiders and outside influences made the segregationist status quo arrangements of the South impractical, absurd, and essentially unenforceable. The international center drew upon cultural, political, and artistic resources from around the world, and programs were open to all Fisk students and the local citizens of Nashville. By encouraging students to think in a global manner, the program attempted to end students' isolation from world ideas; exposure to outside influences fed the changing mindset of Fisk students and accustomed them to an integrated life style and encouraged them to challenge the norms of the local community. The boundary-pushing international program helped introduce a different way of thinking about race to American blacks at Fisk--one in which integration was possible and desirable. (Contains 26 endnotes.) (CH)

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"Fisk students would go down to the White side of the theater and speak in French or German or Spanish. The attendants couldn't understand what they were saying and would eventually give them a ticket thinking they were from the islands."

—Prince Rivers, Fisk Student, 1999[1]

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the lives of black people in the South were filled with graphic reminders of their status in the community. Signs reading "White only" or "Colored" were placed near restrooms, drinking fountains, restaurants, and movie theatres. Tennessee was not an exception to this adherence to Jim Crow. Black residents there felt discrimination in their jobs, in housing, and in recreational activities. Segregation forced blacks into separate areas of the city. They were denied access to hospitals, parks, and beaches. In effect, "what had been maintained by custom in the rural South was to be maintained by law in the urban South." In addition to this legalized segregation, blacks were forced into silence by a constant threat of violence. Many times they would suffer dire consequences if they stood up for their rights. For example, in Columbia, Tennessee, a single incident of a black man, James Stephenson, challenging a white salesperson in a dispute over radio repair, led to a riot in which over 100 black men were arrested by the Tennessee Highway Patrol. Many were beaten while in custody.[2]

In the early 1950s, in particular, the South was tense. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was fighting vigorously for the integration of public schools—filing five suits in federal court questioning the

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constitutionality of segregation. These cases were grouped together under the heading of Brown v. Board of Education. In response, the local white citizens of Nashville were preparing not to comply with a possible desegregation decision of the Supreme Court in the Brown case.[3] These citizens continued their quest even after the Brown decision was handed down. According to historian Aldon Morris, prior to a school desegregation case being opened, black parents were asked to sign petitions. "Those parents who worked with the NAACP were often identified by whites and forced to withdraw their names or be fired from their jobs and face the possibility of bodily harm to themselves or their children." Teachers who were members of the NAACP or who were willing to teach integrated classes were often fired.[4]

During this same period, outside forces began to create weaknesses in the bastions of segregation. The influence of the media exposed the inequality of segregation to those outside the South. The presence of black veterans returning from World War II —who had fought against the United States' enemies in the name of democracy — exposed the enormous contradictions of legalized segregation. As time went on, a combination of non-violent protest and judicial measures changed the way that blacks looked at legalized segregation. This paper will address another influence on segregation in the South — that of international students and international programming at historically black college campuses.[5]

Although located in Nashville, the Fisk University campus provided an integrated environment for its students, faculty, and guests. A historically black college, Fisk was founded in 1866 and had a rich tradition of providing liberal arts education to its students. Its first black president, Charles S. Johnson, created a milieu at Fisk that gave young

blacks the benefits of integration. At Fisk, prominent artists and intellectuals of varying races and nationalities came together to nurture students and encourage scholarship. Not only was the campus integrated in terms of its faculty and guest speakers, but it boasted a student body of American blacks, international students, and a small group of white students, all attending classes together. According to one of these students, Jane Fort,

> During Dr. Johnson's presidency, the campus burst with intellectual activity: the faculty was full of well-trained professors, the best in their fields. There [were] regular convocations with national and international speakers. The impact of the summers' various meetings, including, but not limited to the Race Relations Institute, was felt throughout the academic year. The campus also enjoyed a concert series that brought international performers and the annual Spring Music and Arts Festival in which the humanities were celebrated through performances by our campus groups and national and international presenters as well. During my years, we heard from and had an opportunity to meet and interact with such notables as W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Langston Hughes and so many others that we may have taken it all too much for granted."

A nationally and internationally connected figure, Charles S. Johnson used his status as a researcher and advisor to several United States presidents, philanthropists, and the United Nations, to bring acclaim to the campus and attract foreign students to it.[7] The student body consisted of men and women of different races from China, Japan, Haiti. This influx of international students — who were not accustomed to segregation —

sometime forced a relaxation of the city's Jim Crow arrangements.[8] As noted by Prince Rivers in the opening quotation, many white southerners were not sure how to react to blacks with foreign accents.

This paper will examine how the presence of outsiders and outside influences made the status quo arrangements of the South impractical, absurd, and in many cases unenforceable. Further, the author will explore the apparent change in mindset among Fisk students resulting from these outside influences. Lastly, this paper will place the international program and its effects in the context of Johnson's overall push for racial integration.

In order to understand the situation at Fisk and in Nashville, it is necessary to take a closer look at Fisk's president during the late 1940s and early 50s. President Johnson came to Fisk schooled in the Chicago-style of sociology, comfortable with wealthy elites and the art world, and equipped with extensive international experience. His career and interactions were much more far-reaching than those of earlier Fisk presidents. This fact played a significant part in the changes taking place at Fisk.

Although he shared with other Black leaders a sense of outrage over the injustices of segregation, his approach was liberal, not radical. Charles Johnson's circle of friends included people of all races and showed his advocacy of cooperation across racial lines. He thought that change would come only from methodical planning and was not an advocate of quick fixes. He preferred a balanced approach rather than the hardheaded pursuit of a single idea.[9] His approach is evident in the renowned Fisk race relations institutes of which he was the director. The race relations were held annually at Fisk and brought a variety of prominent figures to the Fisk campus to discuss the then current

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status of race relations in the United States.[10] Johnson's international perspective, gained through field research abroad, specifically in colonial Africa, and service on United Nations committees helped him to see the larger issues that would eventually cause change at the local level.

This international experience, coupled with an intimate familiarity with the South, led him to develop ideas that were different from those of his contemporaries. Whereas it is typically assumed that the society around an institution of higher learning is supportive of its efforts to increase the knowledge base in the community, this was not the case for Fisk. The surrounding community was uncomfortable with white and black students and faculty interacting, studying and conducting research together. Johnson believed that by leading a first-rate historically black college in the South—a university whose academic program attained a level equivalent to many prominent white institutions — he was demolishing the notion that blacks were intellectually inferior. Charles Johnson was supportive of and demanded integration on the Fisk campus. He believed that Fisk would be an incubator for changes that might eventually happen throughout the country.[11]

Often ahead of his time, Johnson was heavily criticized and mistrusted by many black leaders and white southerners alike. Some of his ideas, however, would prove to be prophetic in the field of black higher ed. One of his goals for academic and social preparation at Fisk was to build students up in "terms of their own strength and identity." According to Peggy Alsup, a Fisk student, Johnson was fond of saying, "'This is where we come to give these kids the strength that they are going to need to confront the rest of the world.'" Much different from the challenge found in the Civil Rights movement—to prepare students for civil disobedience—Johnson's focus was on "nurturing and

incubating" students: giving them academic tools, self-worth, and confidence. Johnson would say, "there are many different ways to make change." His way often involved research and cooperation between blacks and whites.[12]

Although the international center at Fisk was established under the previous president's administration, Charles S. Johnson made a conscious effort to make it more active and increase the number of international students on campus. The center drew upon cultural, political, and artistic resources from around the world and the programs were open to all Fisk students and the local citizens of Nashville. According to student body president Prince Rivers,

> [the] Fisk international center was the hub of the intellectual community. Through it, Fisk provided entertainment and education for all of Nashville. For example, we used to have a film series every Saturday and Sunday night and we'd play foreign films and the Nashville community was welcome.... Fisk was one of those places in Nashville where all people could get together and mingle without concern.[13]

The international center's film series was quite comprehensive and included films from France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Russia, Spain, Italy, England, Japan, and the United States. On any given Saturday or Sunday between 150 and 200 people were in attendance. The films included "The Mad Queen" (Spain), "The Damned" (French), "Stone Flower" (Russian) and "Mr. Deed Goes to Town" (American). Although an international film series seems the norm on most college campuses today, Fisk was ahead of its time in providing this type of entertainment. The nature and content of many of the films were radical and included examples of French new wave

and American film noir. Most colleges were not offering foreign and art film screenings of this nature until the 1960s. Not only were the films entertainment for the Fisk students, but they provided an entry into the outside world – a world in which "blacks" were treated differently than in the South.[14]

The Fisk students were exposed to other international influences as well — through guest speakers in music, art, and theater. The visual arts offerings were particularly extensive and ranged from the ancient to the European renaissance to the modern. Through President Johnson's connections with the United Nations, the campus was able to acquire for its permanent collection fifteen aboriginal prints from Australia, India, Yugoslavia, Norway, Egypt, Iran, and Spain. Fisk also showcased the avant garde, hosting a photography exhibition of works by Lisette Model and Irving Penn in 1950 and Man Ray in 1951. In 1955, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York lent a set of Leonardo Da Vinci paintings to Fisk for a rare one-month exhibition. During the same year, the Fisk gallery exposed students to Japanese wood cuts and Egyptian cotton weavings.[15]

The international scope of the guest speaker series encouraged the Fisk students to view their own situation in terms of the larger world. The topics ranged from "Psychology of Aesthetics" to "The Middle East and the Modern World." Speakers came to the campus from Britain, India, Guiana, West Africa, and Japan. There was a special focus on the decline of European colonial empires, a topic that was in the forefront of people's minds in the early 1950s. For example, lectures were given on "British Policy in West Africa" and "The Abolition of Colonialism." These lectures drew attention to the changing situation for people of color around the world. As noted by

historian Harvard Sitkoff,

> The rapid growth of independence movements among the world's colored people had special significance for African Americans. They provided the feasibility of change and the vulnerability of white supremacy, while at the same time aiding African Americans to see themselves as members of a world majority rather than as a hopelessly outnumbered American minority.[16]

By encouraging students to think in a global manner, President Johnson's programs attempted to end their isolation from the rest of the world's ideas. Johnson's influence is evident in the International Center's newsletters to which he contributed many articles and editorials. For example, in an editorial in 1947, he stated,

> As students – and more specifically as Negro students, we sometimes conceive of our own peculiar adjustment to our environment as a problem separate and apart from the main stream of humanity. We tend to lose our perspective and often segregate ourselves in our thinking from the great and significant problems of the world community.[17]

Further, the International Center director, Evadeane Kemp, used a 1946 newsletter to promote interest in the topic of the South and world affairs. She made an effort to highlight the criticism coming from outside the United States regarding our fight for democracy abroad and lack of it in our own country: "Our democracy is judged around the world by how we apply it at home"[18]

The exposure to these outside influences fed into the changing mindset of the Fisk students. In spite of the Jim Crow atmosphere present in Nashville, the international

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center at Fisk brought people of different races together. According to student Peggy Alsup,

> It was a time of strict segregation – we went downtown in groups and we knew where to go and where not to go.... There was not much interaction with the Nashville community. The most interaction came from the international center. There were students from other universities and other countries who would come to Fisk and we would have the opportunity to interact with and learn from them. It was interracial and international.[19]

These international students had a significant impact on the Fisk students and vice versa. According to student Vivian Norton,

> The Fisk campus was an international microcosm. There were regular and exchange students from all over the U.S. and the world. They were pretty comfortable at Fisk; she 'cocoonized' them too. I had white, Asian, and African schoolmates, even one white sorority sister. This taught all of us that the world has all kinds of people in it; we needed to be able to interact in important ways – differences in skin color were irrelevant. We lived in dorms with roommates of different colors religions, and national origins. We had fun; we had disagreements; we dated; we laughed; we cried; we did our laundry; we drank beer; we shopped for clothes; we borrowed and lent; we studied; we passed our courses or not; we were friends.[20]

The international center was more than just a place of diverse offerings. To many of the students including Donna Penn Towns (professor at Howard University), David Levering Lewis (historian and biographer of Martin Luther King, Jr. and W.E.B. Du

Bois); and Preston King (a protester against discrimination in the military recently returned from exile by President Clinton). It was a "cozy place for students to gather to discuss philosophy, poetry, politics, etc." The center became particularly "cozy" during the holidays and summer months when international students and some of the "studious" regular Fisk students would stay on campus. All of the students were housed in one residence hall during these times and they took their meals at the international center. . According to former international center director Mary Thompson,

> President Johnson used to stop by for a visit and give the students an opportunity to ask questions. I remember one of the Taiwanese students asking, 'How can the laws of the state of Tennessee be in opposition to those of the government of the United States?' Johnson, of course, explained the nature of state's rights to the student. This was frustrating to the students. These types of discussion happened all the time — some were organized and some were impromptu.[21]

The Fisk environment got students accustomed to an integrated style of living emboldened them to challenge the norms in the local community. For example, according to Prince Rivers,

> Many of the young women who were fair-skinned would go out and have their hair done. They would not let it be know that they were from Fisk or that they were black – the word is passing. They would go out on the town and fool the white community.[22]

Other students were purposefully defiant. Despite being warned by her mother not to leave the campus or venture into downtown Nashville, Donna Penn Towns decided to

take the bus alone one day. Donna's parents feared her defiant attitude toward Jim Crow — a result of her northern upbringing and her experience on the Fisk campus. However, Donna was not afraid. According to her,

> Whites were on the bus. I [got on] and sat down in a seat near the middle of the bus. The bus driver pulled off, but before he reached the next stop, he noticed that I was not sitting in the back of the bus. He stopped the bus and came to me and asked me to move back. I just stared out the window and did not move. He repeated the request several times and then uttered some profanity and stormed back to his seat and pulled off. That was the end of it. I was not supposed to be on that bus, so I did not make a big deal of telling people when I got back to the campus. Only later did I realize that the results could have been not so pleasant.[23]

The Fisk students would sometimes flaunt their interactions with students of other races in front of passersby. According to student Prince Rivers, "We had great fun when the international students would come to campus. The black students would be standing out on the corner hugging and carrying on with the white international students and people would almost fall out of their cars seeing us on the sidewalk." Although black students were required to sit in the balcony at movie theaters in Nashville, some of the foreign students, in particular, the African students, "used to wear their head wraps and would be treated as whites in the theatres." Sometimes, in fact, the black Fisk students would "don the head wraps and get the 'white treatment' as well." The influence of international students encouraged the Fisk students to confront the absurdity of segregation in other ways as well. They would "go downtown and if [they] saw a colored

fountain, [they] would say hey 'this is a colored fountain and you can buy colored water.'" In effect, the presence of international students encouraged the Fisk students to show contempt and mockery for a system which they had been raised to fear.[24]

Although Fisk students felt contempt for the values of the South, on the whole they were very respectful of core American values —especially free market economics. This respect had a long tradition at Fisk — a university that had a rich history of cooperation with white northern-industrial philanthropists. President Johnson himself had close connections with most prominent American philanthropists during his lifetime. He not only garnered funds from them, but also served on their boards and assisted with the operation of several large philanthropic organizations. Throughout its history, Fisk had hosted many pro-capitalism speakers including Julius Rosenwald of Sears and Roebuck, William Baldwin of the railroad industry; and members of the Rockefeller family.[25] For example, during a campus visit, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. recited, "A Creed for International Friendship" to the Fisk students. In it, Rockefeller set forth the core principles of American capitalism: individualism, responsibility, thrift, and hard work:

> I believe in the supreme worth of the individual and in his right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness....
>
> I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty....
>
> I believe in the dignity of labor, whether with head or hand; that the world owes no man a living but that it owes every man an opportunity to make a living....
>
> I believe that thrift is essential to well ordered living and that economy is a

> prime requisite of a sound financial structure, whether in government, business or personal affairs....[26]

The implication was that the spread of capitalism would lead to peace and harmony throughout the world — an idea that clearly fit in well with Cold War propaganda. It is significant that Rockefeller's reading was recited again during the dedication of the international center.

Fisk students' support of this idea was evident in their activities on campus and their reaction to some international visitors. For example, in 1947, the Oxford University debating team came to campus to challenge the Fisk team.[27] The students were asked to answer the question, "If full employment is to become an international reality, America must radically alter her traditional economic policy."[28] Whereas the Oxford students advocated a move toward a state-run economy, the Fisk students endorsed America's traditional free market system. One reason for student support of free market ideals is the belief that these principles could only be realized in a society free of segregation. Charles S. Johnson taught students that in a Western-style democracy everyone had an equal opportunity – if they worked hard. Johnson believed that a free market system in which blacks could fully participate would help to end racism. Legalized segregation was a contradiction to this idea and the Fisk students stood ready to challenge it.[29]

A combination of Johnson's influence, international programming, and visitors played a part in the changing mindsets of Fisk students during the 1950s. The boundary-pushing international program helped introduce another way of thinking about race to American blacks at Fisk University – a more optimistic view in which integration was possible and desirable. Both the national and international guests and the foreign

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exchange students brought ideas and questions to the Fisk campus that forced the black students to think differently about their situation in Nashville. Further, Johnson's style and philosophy challenged students to question what they saw. Although Johnson himself was not the type to participate in civil disobedience, his influence caused his students to do so. It would have been difficult to question situations and fail to act on the absurdity present in Nashville. Fisk students became important participants in government at all levels, in the education system, and in the civil rights movement. For example, Hazel O'Leary, the former Clinton Energy Secretary and Johnnetta B. Cole, the former president of Spelman College, were Fisk students. Most recently, Fisk alumni who were students during Johnson's presidency, rallied for the exoneration of Preston King. As mentioned above, King was forced to expatriate himself after receiving unfair treatment by a draft board in the 1950s. It was not until this year, after much lobbying of President Clinton, that King was pardoned.[39]

A key factor in the success of Johnson's international programs was their apparent convergence with Cold War aims. The Cold War was fought on a number of levels. There was a fight on the level of ideas — within the super powers and their allied countries — to convince people that their way of life was the right way. Another fight took place at a tactical level – winning over different countries in strategic parts of the world such as Vietnam and the former African colonies. Johnson's agenda for Fisk students showed an awareness of both battles. On the level of ideas, Johnson understood that legalized segregation was a contradiction of the democratic idea and the free market system. By supporting integration as an aspect of freedom and democracy, Johnson was being a patriotic American. In the arena of third world politics, Johnson's recruitment of

international students and his internationally focused lecture series drew attention to the struggles of people in the developing world. These programs reminded people in the South — both black and white — that other nations were looking to the United States for direction. Indirectly, Johnson was showing people that they had to stand up for freedom or risk losing the title of "leader of the free world." Toleration of legalized segregation would have given ammunition to the Soviet Union's claims that it offered the more humane way of life. Johnson's approach proved prescient. The triumph of the civil rights movement came as a result of many factors one of which was the support of American presidents at crucial moments. Ultimately, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Charles S. Johnson showed themselves to be better Cold Warriors than Bull Connor and George Wallace.

Endnotes

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[13] Prince Rivers, interview with author, 25 March 1999
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[15] International Center Annual Report 1955-56, International Center flyer, 30 March 1950, Fiskiana Collection, Fisk University Special Collection, Nashville, Tennessee.
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[17] International Student Center Newsletter, Fisk University, no. 1, 6 March 1947, Fiskiana Collection, Fisk University Special Collection, Nashville, Tennessee.
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[20] Vivian Norton, interview with author, 11 May 1999
[21] Donna Penn Towns, interview with author, 23 March 2000; Mary Thompson, interview with author, January 16, 2000.
[22] Prince Rivers, interview with author, 25 March 1999
[23] Donna Penn Towns, interview with author, 23 March 2000
[24] Prince Rivers, interview with author, 25 March 1999; Donna Penn Towns, interview with author, March 23, 2000; Richard Robbins, Sidelines Activist.
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